

FASTING

“Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in Him a source of sustenance beyond food.”

Dallas Willard



WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is a willing abstinence from food for a given period of time to give ourselves more fully over to God. Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God's will and grace and experience his inescapable presence in a way that goes beyond normal habits of reading, worship, and service.



While there are some who practice fasting from things other than food, we would call that self-denial or abstinence, not the ancient and time-tested Christian practice of fasting. While self-denial is certainly a valuable practice and something we would encourage, fasting from food is different. When you deny yourself of social media or TV, you can devote that time to other hobbies. When you deny yourself of dessert, you can eat a little more dinner. When you deny yourself of coffee, you can drink tea. But when you deny yourself of food altogether, it not only creates a far greater deprivation and emptying, it also has no replacement. There is nothing else that can fill that void, nothing else to depend on, nowhere else to turn, except God.



WHY PRACTICE IT?

Fasting is one of the most abused and least used of all the spiritual disciplines, likely because it doesn't work through our intellect, but through our stomachs— an often foreign idea for people who live in an intellectual society. Yet for millennia, fasting has been a core practice for apprenticeship to Jesus. All the great heroes of the Old Testament fasted. The first story we read about Jesus' adult life is of him fasting for forty days and nights, like Moses and Elijah before him. The central characters of the New Testament continued this practice, as did the early church, which fasted twice a week - every Wednesday and Friday - for over a millennia. It's not until quite recently that fasting fell out of favor.

Like all the spiritual disciplines, it's really easy to lose sight of the "why" behind fasting. But when it comes to fasting, it is especially important to be clear on the "why" because scripture gives a variety of warnings about fasting for the wrong reasons or with the wrong attitude. (1) When people do not live as God desires, they should be prepared for fasting to accomplish nothing (Isaiah 58:3-7). (2) Fasting is not for appearances. It does not make anyone pious or holy, and it does not earn points with God (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:9-14).

The Practices of Jesus – like fasting— are a means to an end. They are the things we engage in that create space for the spirit of God to make us people of love. When it comes to fasting however, scripture indicates three specific things that it can help with, and thus, three specific reasons to practice it:



1. STARVE THE FLESH & FEED THE SPIRIT

We live in a culture not only of food, but of excess and luxury and addiction to what psychologists call “the pleasure principle”— when we make our decision based on what our bodies and minds crave in the moment. Yet for so many of us, the desires of our body have come to hold power over us. In the battle with our “flesh,” we have become its slave, not its master. Fasting is an ancient Christian discipline to break the power of the flesh in our life – our desires, sins, and cravings – and to feed on the Holy Spirit.

2. FASTING AS PRAYER

Fasting is one important method of engaging your entire person (not just your mind) in prayer. Fasting fosters an internal intimacy, a quiet space, in which God’s voice has more room. God is relational. Like any other intimate relationship, we hear one another better when we focus our entire person on the other. And since we are both body and spirit, fasting allows us to pray with our whole selves. It can help us practice the presence of God throughout the day, and can help us seek his will— not as a way to manipulate Him, but as a way to press into what and where he is directing us.

3. SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

When we choose to fast for this reason, we choose to allow our bodies to feel hunger and this hunger becomes an act of solidarity with those who are hungry by no choice of their own. We align our bodies to connect with those suffering. We choose to unite our hearts to those experiencing injustice of all kinds: systemic poverty, slavery, hunger, homelessness, racism, debt, etc.

This fast becomes a practice that trains our heart in compassion and unites us with our brothers and sisters around the world. When we as a community are moved with compassion and work to alleviate the injustices within our community, we reflect God's heart and character to the world.

For more teaching on fasting and the “why” questions,
visit

<https://practicthewayarchives.org/practices/fasting>



FASTING GUIDELINES

Fasting might look different for everyone depending on your experience with it, age, schedule, eating habits, health complications, etc. Thus, below are some guidelines to use as you practice fasting...

- Consider any health concerns before fasting. Allow this to play a role in how you decide to practice fasting. If it's not possible to manage your health concerns or if your doctor would not recommend it, then don't fast! Consider practicing self-denial with something else that will create in you a dependency on God that is hard to be filled by other material things.
- It's not magic. Don't fast if you're in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision.
- Build a rhythm of fasting. To combat using fasting as a way to get immediate answers from God, try adding a period of fasting into your weekly routine, whether you're looking for a specific answer from God or not. Use it as a way to practice the presence of God, starve the flesh, or to practice solidarity with the poor.

- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- Start easy. If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend the time with God that you would have normally used for eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts without guidance.
- Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast the more you need to break the fast gently.
- Pray. During the time you would normally use to eat, spend it in prayer.

